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Hero and Anti-hero in the American Football Novel: Changing Conceptions of Masculinity from the 19th Century to the 21st Century

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Chapter 1

Masculinity as a Search for Meaning

It seems that even under the best of circumstances masculinity has always been a problem, a package central to men's lives that is correctly labeled "handle with care." In his book, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, E. Anthony Rotundo recounts the story of the introduction of the term "neurasthenia" into the American medical lexicon in the year 1869. The word referred to a condition that described a large and growing number of men at the time who were suffering from stress and exhaustion. These were white, middle to upper-middle class men, married landowners who had loving wives, children, good careers, and nearly exclusive access to the avenues of power. Unlike women or minority men, they could attend college, vote, open businesses, and hold positions of power and influence; they controlled the government, education, and religious and economic institutions; they set social agendas, dictated moral codes, and even created their own myths, which, of course, lionized them. One such myth was that of the self-made man, a creature that took on many forms from 1776-1900. In post-Civil War America, the self-made man was, in Victorian middle-class terms, one who started with little, but through hard-work, determination, drive, common sense, and nerve, carved himself a place in a tough man's world. Such a man was measured by his material accomplishments. He was expected to work long hours to ensure professional success; he was supposed to be a dedicated husband, a loving father, a loyal lodge member, a pious religious leader, and a sensible man of the world. Not surprisingly, fulfilling the contrary demands of this masculine identity was too much for many men. Quite simply, they broke down under the weight of an

oppressive masculinity. As a group, these middle class, self-made men were among the most privileged and least challenged men in American history. Yet, they buckled under the pressure of having to live up to a dominant masculine code.¹

The moral of the story is that masculinity, even when practiced among a group of men whose dominance in any given society seems secure, is actually volatile and as potentially harmful as it is helpful. Perhaps this is because any dominant masculine template only seems stable, its supposed position of unquestioned power being merely the stuff of illusion. In reality, the dominant code, in whatever society at whatever time in American history, has always achieved its position by suppressing many alternative codes that, though temporarily brought under its control, are always chipping away at its place atop the hierarchy of masculinities at work in the cultural matrix. As noted sociologist R. W. Connell says, "The history of masculinity ... is not linear. There is no master line of development to which all else is subordinate, no simple shift from 'traditional' to 'modern.' Rather we see ... complex structures of gender relations in which dominant, subordinated and marginalized masculinities are in constant interaction."² The end result of this continual flux in which masculine codes collide and challenge each other, and in which they all change in response to cultural shifts too quickly for most men to keep up, is confusion.

If white American men have struggled to achieve stability and contentment when their power remained relatively unchallenged, it's no wonder that most men feel more than a little off balance today. White men are challenged in every sector of society by men of all races, while Hispanic men have numerically drawn equal to their white counterparts in some areas of the United States. Men of all races have been forced to redefine masculine codes based on the advancement of women in business, politics, and especially in education, where girls and women have outpaced boys and men in nearly every statistical category for some time now. Gay men have forced straight men to reckon with their own sexuality. Changes in industry, communication, computer technology, and the overall economy have forced men into

new work patterns, with many men being forced out of work. It is not unusual for a wife to make more money than her husband, or for a father to be the primary caregiver, establishing his domain in the domestic sphere while mom takes on the role of breadwinner, despite the fact that most of his peers will still expect him to be the parent who financially supports the family.

Such confusion is reflected in the barrage of conflicting images that rain down on men every day from televisions, radios, magazines, novels, internet sites, and an array of advertisements, drenching them in a sea of contradiction. What does it mean, for instance, to be a father? Is it to be a carefree moron, like Homer Simpson, or a loveable bumbler like Ray Romano? If you flip the channel to Nickelodeon, you might find the sobriety of Jim Douglas, the cool confidence of Mike Brady, or the paternal wisdom of Howard Cunningham to your liking. They were in their hey-day in the sixties and seventies, but they continue to exist side-by-side with their contemporary television counterparts thanks to never-ending reruns. Television is a powerful image-maker, indeed, but it is hardly the only one. Drive down the busiest strip in your town and you'll likely see uplifting billboards encouraging fathers to spend more time with their kids or men who are pictured as responsible physicians, real-estate agents, or friendly bankers, followed by angry looking men under whose picture the text reads "Stop Child Abuse" or "Report Deadbeat Dads."

The contradictions never end. Watch the evening news and you will see countless images of heroic men, soldiers fighting for the liberation of oppressed peoples, policemen serving the public, or public servants trying to correct societal problems, whom any boy would be proud to call dad; however, you will also see that most of the oppression, crime, and social problems are being caused or exacerbated by men acting as terrorists, criminals, or social deviants. No venue is without conflict. Consider athletics, long a hallowed arena for many men. Sports fans are used to heroic field generals and courageous veterans whose tremendous athletic feats on the field are rivaled by their commitment to community service, but they are

equally accustomed to spoiled millionaires whose sexual irresponsibility is matched only by a level of immaturity and greed that is hardly paternal.

Of course, the confusion is hardly limited to men who are fathers. Boys and men of all ages are surrounded by a wild array of conflicting myths that swirl around them in diverse cultural packaging. Should one be a warrior who is defined by his capacity for violence, as suggested by Bruce Lee, Steven Segal, or Jean-Claude Van Damme films? Or, should one aspire to define oneself around a model of sensitivity and caring, as suggested by the men in *Madame Butterfly* or *Angels in America*? Both are problematic. Displays of force may make one feel manly, but in the long run violence usually results in the destruction of its perpetrators. Sensitivity and gentleness simply don't play well in many venues, where toughness and competitiveness are so highly valued. The star athlete is another tempting template, but it has its problems. Only a few can attain such lofty status, and those who do often have to sacrifice their bodies, education, or emotional development. Plus, like so many templates for the young, the athlete and his glory fade quickly. Closely related to the athlete is the image of the all-American boy, the kid who excels at sports, is a good scholar, has many friends including a beautiful girlfriend, wins the respect of both his peers and adults, is psychologically balanced, defends the weak, and dispenses justice with fairness and equanimity. Even though it is an identity that is impossible to maintain, the myth of the well-rounded young man still survives, even as it is upended and made fun of at every turn. Within the boundaries of the same school or town, the all-American boy can be both admired and despised, with many boys winding up dazed and confused within a whirlwind of conflicting stories.

Of course, there are many other roles and accompanying myths that tempt boys and men. The soldier has often held an honored, romantic place in the minds of young men, but the soldier leads a hard life with low pay, spends long periods away from loved ones, and sometimes dies for causes he may or may not believe in. The "ladies' man," the stud for lack of a better term, has always been admired in male circles; however, sexual conquest is at best on the outs and the ladies' man is seen

as a bit of joke; at worst, macho behavior is simply a form of sexual harassment. For years, if you didn't want to be a hero of some type, you could be a rebel. Even into the fifties and sixties, films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One* celebrated the power of the anti-hero. But where is the power of the rebel today? It seems non-existent. Whether one fashions oneself as an artist, hippie, skater, motor-head, racer, dropout, hipster, goth, gangster, or moop, it will likely seem forced and artificial. Even the coolness of the rebel is now uncool. The quality PBS film, *Merchants of Cool*, is a wonderful resource for understanding how the American industry, especially the media, thrive off identity confusion. For nearly every identity one can have as a young man has been conceived, co-opted, promoted, and just as quickly ridiculed by media forces that both package and sell coolness to young men even as they undermine that very coolness. In the process, two things have been exposed. The first is that none of these templates of cool are actually achievable; the second is that even if they were, they would not satisfy the needs of any young man.³ In summary, the contradiction is as follows: hundreds of images say: be the breadwinner, be the conqueror, be the aggressor, be the sexual hero, be the athlete, the soldier, the husband, the rebel, the artist, the hippie, etc., and yet, don't be any of those things because they are harmful, silly, a joke. Where do you go when all of the myths still circulate even as they are continuously exposed? It's disorienting. As scholar Gene Veith, Jr. says of postmodern culture, "If there are no absolutes, if truth is relative, then there can be no stability, no meaning in life. If reality is socially constructed, then moral guidelines are only masks for oppressive power and individual liberty is an illusion."⁴

The confusion is further evidenced in the way academics have addressed masculinity. Any perusal of titles in an academic library will reveal the angst that surrounds masculinity. Consider Warren Rosenberg's *Legacy of Rage*, James McBride's *War, Battering, And Other Sports: The Gulf Between American Men and Women*, Stephen Boyd's *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*, Stephen Norwood's *Strikebreaking & Intimidation: Mercenaries and Masculinity in*

Twentieth-Century America, Michael Schwalbe's *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture*, Russell West's *Subverting Masculinity: Hegemonic and Alternative Versions of Masculinity in Contemporary Culture*, Marilyn Wesley's *Violent Adventure: Contemporary Fiction of American Men*, Warren Steinberg's *Masculinity: Identity, Conflict, and Transformation*, Renford Reese's *American Paradox: Young Black Men*, T. Walter Herbert's *Sexual Violence and American Manhood*, or Greg Forter's *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel*. The titles, just like the pages of the books themselves, drip with the anger, pain and torment that, in the view of many academics, characterizes masculinity, a trait that seemingly is chiefly defined by its need to be overcome, to be redeemed. Men's collective need for redemption is underscored by nearly every serious work on manhood and masculinity. *Masculinity, Bodies, Movies, Culture*, edited by Peter Lehman, is a good example. Some of the articles include, Krin Gabbard's "'Someone is Going to Pay': Resurgent White Masculinity in *Ransom*," Lehman's "Crying Over the Melodramatic Penis: Melodrama and Male Identity in Films of the 90s," Joe Wlodarz's "Rape Fantasies: Hollywood and Homophobia," Robert Lang and Maher Ben Moussa's "Choosing to Be 'Not a Man': Masculine Anxiety in Nouri Bouzid's *Rih Essed/Man of Ashes*," Susan White's "T(he)-Men's Room: Masculinity and Space in Anthony Mann's *T-Men*," Dennis Bingham's "Oliver Stone's *Nixon* and the Unmanning of the Self-Made Man," and last, but surely not least, Sally Robinson's "'Emotional Constipation' and the Power of Damned Masculinity: *Deliverance*: and the Paradoxes of Male Liberation." Constipation indeed.

Is there a way to make sense of the confusing world of masculinity and the horrible tensions that so many men feel? Most scholars are unified in answering in the affirmative, and they are nearly as unified regarding their explanation of the problem. In fact, the crux of the dilemma, in the eyes of most scholars, can be summed up in one word: power. The theory goes something like this. Men have always primarily defined themselves in terms of power; they have sought it over a

number of "others," and they have feared humiliation at the hands of those who have power. Masculinity is most clearly viewed as either one or the other of these things. A man is either concerned for how he can control others or he is seeking to avoid emasculation by a more powerful person or institution. Masculinity, then, can be looked at as a test that never ends; for a man must continually engage a paradigm of conflict that will leave him feeling either superior or "unmanned." The world is made up of adversaries, "others," and a man is measured by his ability to control them.

By far, most contemporary scholars have focused on men's fear of women, generally concluding that traditionally masculinity has been derived from men either controlling women or, at the very least, avoiding all behaviors that might be considered feminine; for such behavior might earn one the nickname "Mary" or "sissy," and thus the humiliation a man seeks to avoid. A good example of feminist scholarship is *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theories: New Directions*, edited by Judith Kegan Gardiner. Every essay in the book explains a different facet of the patriarchy, that overarching monolith whose name signifies the oppression of women by men everywhere. For instance, in "The Enemy Outside: Thoughts on the Psychodynamics of Extreme Violence with Special Attention to Men and Masculinity," Nancy Chodorow says that masculinity is so inextricably tied to the conquest of women by men in nearly every way possible that the only healthy alternative for both sexes is to obliterate the concept of masculinity as we know it. According to Chodorow, the same is true of femininity, which is nothing more than men's conception of what women should be. Both masculinity and femininity must be blurred until there is a "dislodging of the phallus."⁵

The fear of just such a dislodging has been the subject of many literary, art history, and cinematic studies. For instance, in *Murdering Masculinities*, Greg Forter examines the evolution of the crime novel from Dashiell Hammett to Chester Himes, concluding that the genre is primarily characterized by "its preoccupation with violence. And that violence typically includes a misogyny by which the male hero defines himself by vanquishing a feminine principle that threatens his 'sense of a

discrete self.”⁶ The male reader aligns himself with the hard-boiled hero as he vanquishes all things feminine. Donna Campbell insists that the same fear of effeminacy characterizes the novels of many male writers from 1885-1915. She focuses on the works of Harold Frederick and Frank Norris, contending that *The Damnation of Theron Ware* and *Vandover and the Brute* display the fear that men felt around the turn of the century as women began to make some inroads on previously all-male bastions. Both novels emphasize the moral laxity believed to come with feminization, a quality that weakens a man, making him ripe for the type of downfall suffered by the male protagonists of both novels.⁷ Power has also been a central motif for male artists. Barbara Melosh’s *Gender and American History Since 1890* is one of several fine works that uses art to track the history of gender in the United States. In one essay entitled “Manly Work,” Melosh explains that the reason for a turn to highly masculinized art featuring portraits of working class men between 1935 and 1950 was the fact that patriarchal power was being threatened by a number of sources, including women’s political and economic gains in the face of men’s losses caused by the depression and World War II. According to Melosh, “the figure of the manly worker embodied nostalgia for an imagined past of individual dignity lost in the modern world of work.” For every *Rosie the Riveter* there were hundreds of paintings of construction workers, metal workers, and laborers: “The manly worker of public art bracketed the shame of unemployment by putting it out of sight, replacing it with the ideal of labor.”⁸ Of course, many of these themes have been echoed in cinematic studies, such as *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women*, edited by Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin. The editors affirm that “power and masculinity are virtually synonymous,” and because masculinity “is in need of constant reinforcement,” it calls for men to continually keep women under their control. Indeed, all of the essays in the book drive home this point: From Jimmy Cagney slapping a grapefruit into his girlfriend’s face in *Public Enemy* (1934) to Richard Gere rescuing a prostitute from a life of degradation in *Pretty Woman* (1987), masculinity on the silver screen often involves some type of conquest of

female interests.⁹

Women, however, are not the only objects of conquest by men whose identities are formed primarily by power. Other men are quite often targets. Whether at war, on a sports field, in the boardroom, or in any other area where men are pitted against each other, the goal is to make oneself a winner at the expense of the other guy; to humiliate him. Mark Hussey's *Masculinities: Interdisciplinary Readings* contains an essay by Paul Kivel entitled "The 'Act Like a Man Box'" in which the author contends that masculinity puts men in a power box in which all of their relationships with other men are defined by their ability to best them in some way, shape, or form. The result is usually fear, isolation, anger, or rejection.¹⁰ An even more disturbing book is James McBride's *War, Battering, and Other Sports*, in which he argues that masculinity can be understood by examining the relationship between war, sports like football, and domestic violence. Men have always waged war to solve problems and they have always relied on the threat of physical violence to dominate the domestic sphere. Even their games celebrate the acquisition of territory through brutalizing one's opponent.¹¹ McBride's book may be a bit extreme, but he is only slightly more outspoken than many other authors on masculinity, most of whom see men stagnating in an ongoing zero sum game of dominance and humiliation.

Especially at risk in this power game are minority men and gay men. Already in a vulnerable position, black men have been easy targets for their white counterparts for most of American history. Renford Reese explains the situation nicely in his book, *American Paradox: Young Black Men*. Masculinity has always been defined by power and black men have always been denied access to the avenues of power. If you can't go to school, vote, hold a well-paying job, run for office, or run a business, you don't have much of a chance to compete against other men. In fact, you become the fodder on which the men with power, in this case, middle to upper class white men, cut their teeth. This legacy of humiliation and disempowerment is so deeply ingrained in black culture that Reese feels young black men continue to

feel its effects today.¹² Of course, this experience is not limited to black men. Warren Rosenberg's *Legacy of Rage: Jewish Masculinity, Violence, and Culture* relates a short history of Jewish men in the United States, a history in which Jews have been forced to adopt violent postures because they were denied access to traditional roads to power. Several of the essays in Franklin Ng's *Asian Americans: Reconceptualizing Culture, History, Politics* tell a similar tale for Asian-American men, who have found themselves at the mercy of dominant, white masculine codes by which white men have not only devalued Asian masculinities, but have also deliberately sought to make themselves feel powerful at the expense of Asian-Americans. Perhaps no group of men has been as feared and misunderstood as gay men. Above all other men, it seems that straight men of all races have sought to distance themselves from the specter of homosexuality. As Suzanne Phurr points out in her essay, "Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism," located in Paula Rothenberg's *Race, Class and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, to avoid being called gay or prissy has been to avoid humiliation; to be manly is to demonstrate one's power over gay men and straight men who are branded as feminine.¹³ For those interested in art history, Sarah Burns' *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America* provides an illuminating examination of how at the turn of the century straight artists painted highly traditional, masculine self-portraits as a defense against the aesthetic and decadent movements in art. So afraid were they of Oscar Wilde and his cronies, that many artists put a great deal of work into satirizing them, showing their alleged moral weaknesses, and making every attempt to disassociate homosexuality from art or the artist.¹⁴

Other scholars have written about men displaying their masculinity by maintaining power over technology, laws, language, or knowledge, but the story essentially remains a one-dimensional tale of men defining themselves by acquiring power and denying it to others by using whatever means are considered valuable by their society. Over the last half-century, however, this has gotten much harder for men to do. As mentioned earlier, the country has changed a great deal since World

War II. I wonder how many white men, or most men for that matter, of my generation thought we would see women routinely outnumbering men in medical schools, law schools, and MBA programs? How many would have thought of themselves living as a minority in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood? How many were prepared for a corporate jungle where they would be a faceless number trying to survive in an environment where the laws no longer seem to favor them, and sometimes seem to work against them? How many thought that *Will and Grace*, one of the first television shows to treat homosexuality as completely normal and male heterosexuals as, well, problematic at best, would be a top ten program for several years running? Probably not very many; perhaps the same number that would have thought they would have to feel guilty about having power or material wealth, or about being a man at all. This condition of confusion, of great expectations met by a changing and sometimes bewildering present time, has not been lost on scholars. Most agree that many American men are confused and that they feel threatened on any number of fronts: politically, economically, socially, religiously, domestically, and even athletically, where it has become clear that even that longtime male bastion of sports, perhaps the last holdout of men who wanted to define themselves against woman as other, is as much a female domain as it is a preserve for patriarchal, masculine norms. The bottom line for most scholars is that however you slice it, men expected power and they are not going to get it on the old terms. This has given rise to a kind of panic, a sense of not knowing what to do or how to define oneself.¹⁵

I do not intend to dispute that this theory of masculinity as power and its corresponding conclusions about the current "crisis in masculinity" is not partially correct. There is far too much evidence in its favor for me to do that. However, I am contending that the power theory is only partially accurate. It has its flaws. For instance, one problem that most scholars have not addressed is the question of why, throughout American history, most privileged men who have enjoyed incredible power have not felt terribly secure about their masculinity. What about all those men who reaped the benefits and rewards of power, but who were never happy? Think

about all those men suffering from neurasthenia, or of the countless men driven to acquire more and more power and possessions, but who were never satisfied by the endeavors. Scholars might argue that this is simply the nature of patriarchy, that in and of itself it is a trap that sucks one into a vortex of unquenchable desire for power and conquest that can never truly produce contentment. I would not disagree, but I would hasten to ask exactly why it never brings happiness, and if it cannot bring happiness, what should men do instead to fashion an identity? On these questions, scholars have produced answers which, from my point of view, are unsatisfactory. Feminists have suggested gender equity; Marxists have called for class equality; environmentalists want a respect for and a reconnection with nature; psychologists and psychiatrists have alerted us to the importance of maintaining our intricate inner wiring; postcolonial theorists have recommended recognizing the dangers of the colonialist impulse and embracing the other; new age gurus want us to get in touch with our inner child; many religions say to connect with God or supernatural energy in the universe; some postmodernists recommend a type of humanistic hedonism, doing whatever you like to please yourself as long as you don't hurt anyone. Most of these folks are sincere, and many have good points. After all, most of us like the idea of boys and girls being treated equally, of protecting our environment, or of improving the lot of poor people. Still, these solutions have not satisfied men. That is because they do not address the deeper problem that surrounds masculinity. For the truth is that masculinity is only partly a quest for power. I would even go as far as to say that the quest for power and avoidance of humiliation is a bastardized perversion of true masculinity. At its deepest essence, masculinity is a search for meaning, a quest for a grand narrative that can be trusted. Beyond power, men seek empowerment. They want to be able to act in the context of a master story that can be trusted. This is my theory about how to best understand masculinity and its evolution in the United States. When scholars begin to address the deeper nature of masculinity, they will likely offer more satisfying solutions.

Perhaps the most powerful testament to the fact that men's ultimate quest has

been for meaning over material comfort can be found in the field of religion. From the anthropomorphic gods of Greece and Rome to the big three religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, to many other religious creeds, men in the West have relied on their faith to sustain them. In addition, one can mine the fields of anthropology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, and the sciences for evidence that desire for meaning has been and continues to be a potent driving force for men. Of course, there is abundant literary evidence that men have always desired meaning more than power, and this is my primary interest.

Most of the great books of the Western world, it seems, are about a male protagonist who is seeking to make sense of a confusing world by finding and following some code which he believes is anchored in truth. Homer's *Iliad* tells the tale of Achilles, who seeks honor and fame by following the Greek code of the whole man, balancing physical, mental and spiritual values while defending the state. *The Aeneid* reflects the Roman version of the state hero made in the ideal of the myths of the Republic. The Old English period gives us the epic *Beowulf*, whose hero embodies the old Germanic heroic code of boasting, mighty physical feats, and generosity to one's retainers. At the end of the Middle Ages is Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, an early tribute to chivalry with Arthur, Lancelot, and the other knights of the roundtable performing noble deeds, while earning the love of virtuous women. The Renaissance is defined by works such as Castiglione's *The Courtier*, in which the hero learns to live out a perfectionist's humanist code; the reader is instructed on the importance not only of physical exploits such as riding and fencing, but learns such things as the art of elocution and the writing of love poetry. Much more specialized is Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which is essentially a guide for young lords and princes that instructs them that when it comes to power the ends justify the means and that the measure of a ruler is his ability to adapt so that he can maintain control under changing circumstances. Shakespeare's greatest men earn their merits by following a noble narrative that they believe to be true, and his tragedies are dominated by heroes who are consistently tormented because they cannot adopt a

code by which to act. As Hamlet says, "To be or not to be, that is the question," a statement which reveals the young Dane's deep desire to find a rationale by which to act. Still, the Renaissance is also defined by Christian works such as John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the heroes are saved and the outcasts damned by how they measure up to a Christian code based on the sacred scripture of the *Bible*. Christian themes continued to be prominent in the 19th century in works such as Goethe's *Faust*, but would be rivaled in that century by several movements, including the romanticism of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats, which advocated a manhood based on a spiritual connection with nature and a spirit of sublimity that runs through the universe; the Victorian middle-class propriety evidenced in the novels of Dickens, Collins, and Thackeray; and the wild aestheticism of Wilde, Gide, Zola, and Huymans, whose code of sensual indulgence would presage the permissiveness of the nineteen twenties, sixties, and seventies. The twentieth century would see all of the above codes rehashed in new forms and the ascendancy of others as well, including lost generation nihilism, the shallow, image-driven materialism that has been so dominant since the end of World War II, and postmodern pastiche.

Certainly, this longing for meaning characterizes the best of American literature. Consider Melville's *Moby Dick*, which is narrated by Ishmael, who relates the story of Ahab, a man who pursues the great white whale that comes to symbolize the great and elusive meaning of the universe. It is understanding that Ahab desires and the character that both he and Ishmael admire most in the novel is Queequeg, the savage tribesman who has complete faith in his little statue, Yojo. The western reader is tempted to think of Queequeg as simple and foolish to believe in the goodness of such an idol, but he is happy, content, and fulfilled, everything that Ishmael in particular so steadfastly desires. As Charles Haberstroh comments, "Queequeg is so attractive to Ishmael because he is ... a figure of enormous psychological stability compared to Ishmael. He does not go through the discursive mental gymnastics Ishmael does, because he already possesses the integration of personality that Ishmael

can only hope for.”¹⁶ The desperate need for significance and understanding in *Moby Dick* is similar to that seen in the works of another great nineteenth century novelist, Mark Twain, whose *Mysterious Stranger* features a narrator on a quest to understand how the world works and what his function should be. Twain explores whether or not God exists, if there are supernatural forces of good and evil controlling us, how much free will we have as we try to control our fate, and whether or not we can ever hope to circumvent fate. The quest for meaning remains the central theme of the best 19th century American literature, including such novels as William Dean Howell’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Rebecca Harding Davis’ *Life in the Iron Mills*, Henry James’ *The American*, Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Frank Norris’ *McTeague*, Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier*, and a host of others.

The desire for meaning is even more pervasive in twentieth-century American literature. Earnest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* reflects an entire generation’s questions about the stability of religion, science and tradition. The author advances his famous code of grace under pressure as the true measure of a man who must display courage and search for meaning even as he believes that the search will prove to be fruitless. John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals an author who wants to redefine Christianity in more humanistic terms so that the human race can forge a new grand narrative on which to rely. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* tells the story of a black man whose deepest lament is not being black in white America, but rather being existentially invisible; he longs for a master narrative that will grant him visibility and significance more than he does racial equality. Written around the same time, Sloan Wilson’s *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* chronicles the disintegration of a man who follows his culture’s philosophical recipe for success; Wilson exposes the hollowness of the American Dream, which clearly lacks a spiritual dimension. Chaim Potok’s *My Name is Asher Lev* tells the story of a young man who tries to sort through religious and parental pressures to define himself as an artist. Much like *The Chosen* and *The Promise*, the novel is an autobiographical tale of a young man trying to find out what the point of life is. Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* is similar. It

is the story of Tayo, a young Laguna man trying to reconnect with a powerful story that can sustain him in the face of life's difficulties. He has been taught white ways, but is sick and near death until he begins to relearn the religious stories of the Laguna tribe. His belief in the Laguna master story saves his life. In *End Zone*, Don DeLillo assembles a group of football players at small Logos College in West Texas where they search for, what else, the Word. When they don't find meaning, they fall apart; money, sensual delight, and conquest is not enough to sustain them. Philip Roth's *My Life as a Man* has as its subject a man who sees through many of the things in which his society invests importance; he grows tremendously throughout the novel, but eventually fails because, while he can see the flaws in false centers, he can never find a reliable center of meaning on which to base his life. Similar is John Updike's *Rabbit* novels, in which Rabbit Angstrom tries nearly every culturally sanctioned template of manhood imaginable; he rejects them all in time and ultimately remains unfulfilled because he cannot find a master narrative that he believes to be true. Most recently, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* makes one recall Twain's themes in *Mysterious Stranger*: Where is God? Who are we? Why are we here? What should we be doing? These are the questions which still dominate men's lives.

Certainly, men have always tried to answer these questions, and even a brief survey of American culture reveals that they have advanced many masculine centers, hoping that they might act as stable narratives, the stability resulting from the center being rooted in a reliable grand narrative. It seems as though most of these centers can be grouped into five dominant categories: the rugged individualist, the man of conquest, the hero, the American dreamer, and the religious man.

Over the centuries, American rugged individualism has taken many forms, but all of them have centered around men making meaning of their lives by physically mastering their environment. Perhaps the quintessential example of this center is Natty Bumppo of James Fennimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Muscular, level-headed, clever, and experienced, Bumppo tamed the wilderness just as Americans themselves were heading to the frontier. The wild, burly woodsman

felled trees, braved harsh weather conditions, fought wild animals, strong-armed mountain ruffians, and dealt firmly and justly with Indians. A few decades later, Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, two actual frontiersmen handy with guns, knives, and fists, would supplant Bumppo in the pages of paperback novels as the hero of young boys all over the United States in 19th century, with Boone appealing mostly to rising middle class, Victorian sensibilities and Crockett moving in for Bumppo as the hero of the common man.¹⁷ Even when the frontier began to vanish for good at the end of the century, rugged individualism continued to manifest itself in various occupations including the firefighter, the butcher, the blacksmith, the farmer, the cowboy, and eventually the hard-boiled private detective made famous in the mid-twentieth century novels of Dashiell Hammett. Rugged individualism has become harder to achieve in the current corporate age with its emphasis on technology and teamwork, but it still permeates our culture, as evidenced by the proliferation of such films as *Unforgiven*, *Braveheart*, or *Alexander*, all of which celebrate the self-sufficient man of our mythic past.

Closely related to the rugged individualist is the man of conquest who, operating within a paradigm of conflict, achieves meaning by consistently defeating some "other." The soldier has always been the epitome of man of conquest. Though often operating in group context, he nonetheless makes meaning of his world by vanquishing the enemy. For most of his history, the soldier has enjoyed a highly romanticized reputation, which has lasted even into the modern age. As former soldier Ron Kovic writes in *Born on the Fourth of July*, "John Wayne in *The Sands of Iwo Jima* became one of my heroes. On Saturdays after the movies, ... we turned the woods into a battlefield. We set ambushes, then led gallant attacks. Then we would walk out of the woods like the heroes we knew we would become when we were men."¹⁸ Kovic's novel is one of many that exposes the dangers of the masculinity of conquest, dangers which are even more apparent in this template's other variations. For example, there is the ever-snarling bully, who generates meaning through the humiliation of others. There are far too many of these men

about; they are often our criminals and they are far too often cultivated on our city streets and schoolyards. Consider poet Jonathan Holden's description of the bully as a B-52 bomber armed to kill: "The B-52 would give you the finger from hot cars. It laid rubber, it spit, it went around in gangs, it got its finger wet and sneered about it. It beat the shit out of fairies."¹⁹ Holden knew that America's mentality of conquest is sewed into its young men early in their lives; it is the mentality of the bully and the bully nation, one that seeks to solve problems by imposing its will on others. Perhaps a less obvious manifestation of this masculine template is the corporate warrior, as seen in novels such as Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities*, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, or Jane Smiley's *Good Faith*, the man who leads his company in its quest to squash all competition even as he himself is taking down all opponents on his way to the top.

Some might argue that the most powerful and pervasive masculine template is that of the hero, defined here as the ultimate community man; there can be almost as many types of heroes as there are communities, even subcultures, to sanction their heroism. In the United States, we have seen the rise and fall of war heroes, statesmen, reformers, activists, clergymen, fathers, artists, actors, musicians, writers, athletes, and even rebels, who have served as icons of manhood for various groups of men. These men inspire other men because they represent the ultimate in the eyes of the people who look up to them; like all role models, they are paragons of meaning. Consider the popularity of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, whose anti-hero Sal Paradise hits the road in search of meaning beyond the conventions of middle-class America. Sal and his sidekick Dean remain heroes to countless young men to this day. By contrast, another of the most compelling centers for young men has been the ever-present but ever-changing template of the all-American boy, a curious amalgam of many of the above heroic models whose mixture has varied depending on historical circumstances. Most recently, an all-American boy might be a combination of a scholar and an athlete with a bent toward religion and a reputation for impeccable character. That he might have some artistic talent and a pretty girlfriend wouldn't

hurt his cause either. Of course, like all heroic templates, the all-American boy has as many variations as there are communities in the United States.

A more distinctly American center of meaning is that of the American dreamer, a man who lives out the dominant paradigm of success of his time. For much of the country's history that has been a combination of professional, consumerist, and domestic achievement. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, many Americans admired the common man who, like the fictional Horatio Alger, rose from rags to riches via hard work and the strength of his moral character. If one didn't always acquire wealth, he might at least gain a high degree of comfort and status. In the twentieth century, the template would take on a more middle-class feel, the idea being to work hard so that you might get a good job; marry an attractive, loyal wife; have well-behaved, talented children; and be able to afford a house, a car (then two cars), a television, and a slew of other reasonably affordable possessions which would contribute to one's ability to enjoy life and to claim oneself a success. Thus, a man might become a dependable breadwinner, a loving husband and father, and a professional success. There are also novels such as *Peyton Place* and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* which reflect the limitations of this center, and with the breakdown of the family in the late twentieth century, the American dream seems to have morphed into a horrible blend of comfort, images, and distraction, often via such things as jet skiing, bungee jumping, violent video games, and spectator sports with their accompanying fantasy leagues. The breadwinning father is still there, but he seems to be overshadowed by the less family-oriented man whose desire for sensual pleasure and pleasant distraction overrides the more noble domestic and professional goals of his 1950s counterpart.

Finally, there is religion, the most ancient and international of all centers of meaning that American men have adopted in a wide variety of forms. For much of the nation's history, Christianity has been the favored faith of American men, as reflected in such classic novels as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or Harold Frederick's *The Damnation of*

Theron Ware, all of which celebrated both the pleasure and pain associated with religious belief. Certainly, Christian practice has been reinvented in many forms in the twentieth century. One of the more interesting turn of events has been the sudden rise of the Promise Keepers movement in the late nineties, which was itself an outgrowth of a powerful Evangelical movement in the United States. The last century also saw powerful novels like Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* and Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer*, which celebrated the experience of young men growing up in the Jewish tradition at mid-century. Countless books appear in university libraries and even on the shelves of local bookstores about men and Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and many other religions; all of these books attempt to tell men how to use the dictates of the faith to find meaning and therefore peace in their lives. Recently, the rise in popularity of new-age religions and the mythopoetic men's movement reveals that, though its face may change, religion continues to be a powerful center for male identity.

While it is useful to categorize masculine types, it is more important to ask oneself several questions about all of this. How do these centers gain ascendancy in any given society at any given time? Why don't they last? Why do they later reappear in altered forms, especially since they were dismissed as being unsatisfactory in the past? Then, there is also the issue of just what it is, if anything, that ties these templates together. Is there a process at work here by which we can understand how masculinity, no matter what template or type we are talking about, works?

To answer these questions, I put one masculine center under the microscope. I examined the template of the football hero, a variant of the athletic hero that has been so influential over the course of the twentieth century. What I found is that the football hero is similar to every other masculine template in that it is characterized by the same process of masculinity; the process can be described as follows. First, inspired by cultural conditions that give rise to new realities, and especially new fears, men reinvent age-old masculine centers (ie: the hero) that allow them to create what seem to be solid, gratifying identities that appear to be permanent, natural and

trustworthy. One of the most important things to remember is that any given center, in addition to appearing stable and reliable, is attractive at its height because it allows men to address the most powerful circumstances of their day.

Second, once the template has reached its height of power, it begins to suffer from exposure. It is revealed to be at best partially true and at worst emotionally or physically dangerous, and it is thus roundly criticized. In the long run, it will often be rejected by many of its former adherents. For these thoughtful men, the template usually recedes to the margins of their lives. In addition, as the cultural conditions that gave rise to the center's effectiveness fade into the sunset, the center fades as well. The big thing to remember, however, is that in the eyes of most men there is no ultimate center, one that could be considered to be rooted in what some call absolute truth, waiting to replace the departing template. Thus, only one thing can happen. Men will adopt another culturally inspired, man-made model which in time will prove to be yet another "false center" in the sense that it purports to be rooted in a stable discourse, but is in reality flawed. Eventually, the discarded center will make its way back into the limelight in a slightly different form that is more in line with the psychological needs of the men of the day. This reinvention and return to prominence is the third step in the life of a masculine template.

This process gives rise to an odd condition. The thinking man knows that any masculine center, no matter how solid it seems at any given time in history, is man-made, volatile, relatively inaccessible except to a few who can actually live it out, and otherwise full of hidden pitfalls. Any such center that a man consciously or unconsciously adopts will have to be rejected, but in favor of what? Since there seems to be no ultimate center, in the words of French philosopher Jacques Derrida no "transcendent signified," how can men ever construct and embrace a masculine center rooted in stable ground? There seems to be nowhere to turn except to another false center. Clearly, men must simultaneously embrace and reject these centers. The seemingly contradictory acceptance and rejection is what I call *ironic resistance*, the fundamental characteristic of American masculinity.

Thus, the question becomes, how do we negotiate ironic resistance? I will attempt to answer that question in this book as I discuss the origins and evolution of the football hero in a way that will hopefully allow us to understand the process of masculinity, the confusion that usually results from that process, and some ways of coping with that process. Some might wonder why, of all the masculine centers I could have chosen to illustrate my points, I chose the football hero. According to my theory, I could have chosen any template since they all reveal the same process at work, but I chose the football hero because I feel that it is representative of the possibilities and pitfalls for men in the early twenty-first century. Sport is one of the arenas with which men most want to identify themselves, and football is perhaps the most popular sport for boys and men in America, one that cuts across all races, classes, and ages. In addition, when one looks at sports literature over the course of the twentieth century, one can see that the football hero occupies a great deal of privileged space, so much so that it is hard to deny the appeal that the football hero has had for men and boys over the years. Finally, the combination of extreme adoration and criticism of the football hero proved to be irresistible. For though he is loved, he is also disliked, and this concurrent embrace and rejection is the heart of ironic resistance.

Notes

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³ Barak Goldman, *Merchants of Cool* (Boston: WGBH Educational Foundation, 2001).

⁴ Gene E. Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Theory and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994) 72.

⁵ Nancy Chodorow, "The Enemy Outside: Thoughts on the Psychodynamics of Extreme Violence with Special Attention to Men and Masculinity," *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theories: New Directions* ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 257.

⁶ Greg Forter, *Murdering Masculinities: Fantasies of Gender and Violence in the American Crime Novel* (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 25.

⁷ Donna Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction: 1885-1915* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997) 75-108.

⁸ Barbara Melosh, ed., *Gender and American History Since 1890* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 177.

⁹ Pat Kirkham and Janet Thumin, eds, *Me Jane: Masculinity, Movies and Women* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995) 16-18.

¹⁰ Paul Kivel, "The 'Act Like a Man' Box," *Masculinities: Interdisciplinary Readings* ed. Mark Hussey (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003) 69-71.

¹¹ James McBride, *War, Battering and Other Sports* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995) 8-11.

¹² Renford Reese, *American Paradox: Young Black Men* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2004) 61-102.

¹³ Suzanne Phurr, "Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism," *Race, Class and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study* ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992) 431-441.

¹⁴ Sarah Burns, *Inventing the Modern Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 79-120.

¹⁵ Ronald F. Levant, "The Masculinity Crisis," *The Men's Studies Journal* 5 (February, 1997) 221-231.

¹⁶ Charles J. Haberstroh, *Melville and Male Identity* (Rutherford, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 1980) 95.

¹⁷ David M. Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth Century America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) 55-107.

¹⁸ Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) 55.

¹⁹ Jonathon Holden, "Why We Bombed Haiphong," *Real Things: An Anthology of Popular Culture in American Poetry* eds. Jim Ellidge and Susan Swartwont (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999) 8.